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ABSTRACT

The challenge of creating site-level support for teacher involvement in collaborative inquiry and reflective discourse is examined in this paper, which asserts that this process is an important component of school leadership in general and instructional leadership in particular. In considering the amount of "sense-making" to be incorporated into the administrative role, the discussion draws on ideas about school leadership and the development of school culture, current literature on supervisory practices, and personal experiences with peer support networks. Ways to improve administrator effectiveness by creating structures and strategies to develop staff commitment in learning through collaborative inquiry and reflection are illustrated. A conclusion is that administrator support of individual and group "sense-making" is crucial for professional growth. (22 references) (LMI)

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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AS COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES[1]

Ginny V. Lee

June 30, 1990

ABSTRACT

This article examines the challenge of creating site-level support for a kind of conscious "sense-making." This process includes examining our own uses of knowledge: what do we think we know and understand about learning; and how do we apply that knowledge, how do we "translate" our understanding of our profession into our day-to-day activities in our work with students and colleagues? It argues that this is an important component of school leadership in general and instructional leadership in particular. It considers how such sense-making can be incorporated into the work of an administrator with his or her staff. In doing so, it draws from current thinking about supervisory practices; it incorporates ideas about school leadership and the development of school culture; and it reflects the experiences of myself and others in working with peer support networks as a way of sharing and improving professional knowledge. The argument is aimed at illustrating how we can improve our effectiveness as educators by creating structures and strategies that develop staff members' commitment to, and involvement in, their own learning through collaborative inquiry and reflection.

INTRODUCTION

That many schools today are unable to achieve the outcome of providing successful educational experiences for all students is an undeniable and unacceptable reality. Moreover, for site administrators who are committed to improving their schools' capacity to promote the social and academic development of all youngsters, the future may appear daunting. The predictions of those who forecast demographic, economic, technological, and social changes suggest increasingly difficult and complex challenges for schools. Thus, both existing and anticipated conditions influence school leaders to engage in an ongoing search for ways of "doing it better."

This familiar search typically leads administrators to turn "outward" to a variety of experts (staff developers, district leaders, consultants, researchers, policymakers, etc.) for ideas and answers; abundant resources outside the school are available to provide useful information, skills, and strategies to school administrators and their staffs. Often, however, such new ideas are presented and received in ways that are unconnected to existing knowledge and practice. In the extreme, such "unconnectedness" leads to two kinds of outcomes for site personnel: In some cases, information is perceived as not at all applicable to their situation, entirely inappropriate, or as not "implementable" in their context; the time spent in learning is considered a "waste," and the ideas presented are completely dismissed. At the other end of a continuum, the new ideas, information, or skills are well received and perceived as "answers" to specific problems in the school setting, perhaps even as "THE ANSWER."

The scenarios described above are not intended as criticism of staff developers, staff development, or educational practitioners. Rather they are meant as extreme (but, I hope, recognizable) examples of what can happen as a result of the "unconnectedness" that often exists between new learning and existing knowledge and practice. When new ideas are considered as isolated potential "answers" to specific problems, rather than as elements of a growing repertoire of educational strategies that the teacher or administrator manipulates and transforms into practice, both the school and its staff suffer. The inability to link one's accumulation of strategies conceptually and practically, to integrate new knowledge with what is already known, to consider how new strategies fit with what exists and what is being used, undermines the very intention of seeking new knowledge—the intention of increasing school effectiveness and supporting improvement, of "doing it better."

No matter how much new information we obtain, we cannot improve our effectiveness as educators unless we engage in a continual process of "sense-making"

about what we think we know. This process includes examining our own uses of knowledge: what do we think we know and understand about learning; and how do we apply that knowledge, how do we "translate" our understanding of our profession into our day-to-day activities in our work with students and colleagues? Consciously striving to make such sense or meaning for ourselves, to integrate ideas and examine carefully how we can (and do) use our knowledge, is essential to effectively applying and improving our expertise (Garman, 1984). This is as important for the administrator as the teacher, the novice as the veteran, the "outstanding" educator as the "average" one.

This article examines the challenge of creating site-level support for the kind of conscious sense-making that is being advocated. It argues that this is an important component of school leadership in general and instructional leadership in particular. It considers how such sense-making can be incorporated into the work of an administrator with his or her staff. In doing so, it draws from current thinking about supervisory practices; it incorporates ideas about school leadership and the development of school culture; and it reflects the experiences of myself and others in working with peer support networks as a way of sharing and improving professional knowledge. The argument is aimed at illustrating how we can improve our effectiveness as educators by creating structures and strategies that develop staff members' commitment to, and involvement in, their own learning through collaborative inquiry and reflection.

THE ADMINISTRATOR'S DILEMMA

One of the most important ways in which administrators over the past decade have attempted to address the issue of "doing it better" in their schools is through shifting their focus from their managerial role to their instructional leadership role. The concept of instructional leadership has become a well accepted notion in both our theoretical and practical thinking about strategies to promote school effectiveness and support school improvement (Greenfield, 1987; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Even as new leadership configurations and roles are emerging in the current wave of reform, instructional leadership remains a focus for school administrators as they strive to improve educational outcomes for students.

When site administrators discuss instructional leadership, one of the most frequently heard comments is the frustration they share at not having enough time to spend in this role. They admonish themselves for not making more classroom visits and performing other activities that are closely related to curriculum and instruction; typically, administrators associate effective instructional leadership with activities such as these, which they group under the heading of instructional supervision. Most school leaders regard instructional supervision (specifically classroom observation) as their most direct and legitimate opportunity to influence

instructional practices toward school improvement. Thus, administrators tend to view instructional leadership as something they are expected to *provide;* to regard instructional supervision, particularly classroom visitation, as a critical instructional leadership activity; and to experience frustration (and guilt) at not spending "enough" time in this activity.

Such are the realities of many principals' beliefs and experiences. But are these *reasonable* ideas and expectations? Is it necessary or useful to think about improving a school's instructional effectiveness primarily in this way? If instructional leadership and supervision are important and promising avenues for influencing school excellence, does the principal need to carry this burden alone, or as the head of a small administrative team? What do such expectations say to the administrator who does not see himself as the in-house instructional "expert"? What do they say to the administrator whose context is so unstable that the day-to-day work realities keep her engaged in other kinds of more mundane tasks? What do they say to the administrator who does spend time in classrooms but who doesn't see this leading to any changes in practice (except perhaps when he walks into the room)?

We know enough about the realities of principals' and teachers' work lives to recognize the limitations of the expectations described above given the kinds of organizational structures and environments that characterize typical schools (Peterson, 1982; Lortie, 1975). It is no surprise that administrators describe the task of school improvement as "trying to change the tire while the car is in motion" or "having so many balls in the air that it's all I can do to keep from dropping them."

THE LIMITATIONS OF "OUTSIDE" RESOURCES

Our understanding of effective classroom instruction and of successful supervisory practices constitutes an enormous and impressive body of knowledge. Similarly, our understanding of instructional leadership has been articulated extensively over the past decade. Certainly each of these substantive areas contributes to our ability to provide school personnel with strategies that can support their goals of creating successful schools; old and new knowledge from these areas (and others) provide the substance that can be woven into a tapestry of a successful school. However, a pervading theme underscores the creation of that tapestry—the same theme that underlies the work of all professions and of the disciplines that address the development of persons—and that is the fact (both discouraging and encouraging) that there is *no one best way.*

While we can and do know quite a bit in general about what kinds of behaviors contribute to successful teaching and learning, what actions support effective instructional supervision, and what kinds of activities contribute to instructional leadership, the particulars of how these elements are to be integrated and

implemented in any school cannot be reduced to a set of formulas. The appropriate application of instructional, supervisory, and leadership strategies is situationally specific and dependent on a complex network of contextual factors. This point has been made by many of our colleagues and is perhaps stated most recently and emphatically by Madeline Hunter, whose work is often reduced to simple check lists. Such "violation" (her term) is an inappropriate attempt to find a simple solution for complex tasks; we cannot judge the adequacy of any educational practice by comparing it to a check list. As Hunter states, "We are *never* looking for the presence or absence of any one behavior, technique, or organizational scheme." (Quoted in Joyce, 1990, pp. xiii and xiv, emphasis in the original.)

What does this mean for people who work in schools? In the language of the tapestry metaphor (above), something like this: The work of scholars, researchers, policymakers, staff developers, resource allocators, decision makers, consultants, and any other "outsider" can only take a school staff so far in creating its tapestry. Such persons can show the kinds of materials that can be used, offer instruction in weaving techniques and help people improve their skills, show examples of finished products and describe how they were created, sensitize people to matters of color and pattern, provide feedback, and so forth, but they *cannot* say in detail what the final creation at a particular site should look like, nor can they provide a detailed plan of how to create it.

This does not mean that there are no guidelines or help to be given, but that the act of weaving an excellent school tapestry is a "hands-on" joint venture of great complexity, involving an organic process of applying established understanding and techniques as well as some experimenting and trial-and-error learning. It is an act of deliberate and contextual "translation," which is by no means foolproof or certain; it requires tailoring, adapting, modifying, adjusting, and using our capacity to learn from experience. Thus, while resources outside the school provide some of the means for effecting improvement, whether or not those means will be successfully used depends on what happens within the specific school context.

This idea is not a new one. Most recently we have seen its expression in the notion of reflective practice. Influenced most prominently by Donald Schon (1983; 1990), the concept and nature of reflective practice have received increasing attention over the past several years and have taken hold in our thinking about teachers and administrators alike. In one of the most thorough and useful recent volumes on school administration, Sergiovanni (1987) frames his arguments around the concept of a "reflective practice perspective." Sergiovanni discusses the role and activities of the successful administrator with continued reference to and examples of how a reflective perspective serves as a stance from which principals can process theory and research about school leadership to translate such knowledge into successful

practice in their own settings. Nowhere is such a perspective more appropriate or potent than in the administrator's work with her teaching staff.

THE PARADOX OF INSTRUCTIONAL SUPERVISION

Instructional supervision can be carried out by people in a variety of roles at the building or district level and, in its broadest sense, includes tasks such as curriculum development and staff development. (See Glickman, 1990, for discussion of this more comprehensive view.) As most site-level educators conceptualize and experience it practically, however, instructional supervision is generally equated with activities aimed at providing classroom teachers with constructive feedback about their instructional practices and is typically the responsibility of the site administrator. Its purpose is to support and promote instructional effectiveness. As it is carried out in most schools, "supervision of instruction" and "classroom visitation" are synonymous in the minds of teachers and administrators; indeed, the distinction that seems most important to practitioners (and one with which they often struggle) is the separation of this activity from the activity of teacher evaluation.

A great deal has been written about effective supervisory practice. Among the most important principles or themes are the following: to make a difference in teacher practice, supervision must occur in ways that bring it close to the actual work of teachers in classrooms (Goldhammer, 1969; Sergiovanni, 1987; Glickman, 1990); successful supervision is not something done *to* teachers but rather *with* teachers (Glickman, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1987); supervision needs to take into account the stages of adult development and should be carried out differentially to address individual personal and professional needs of teachers (Glickman, 1990; Glatthorn, 1984).

For the school administrator who seriously attempts to carry out his instructional supervision activities in a meaningful way, this means conducting multiple direct observations of classroom activities, including pre- and post-conferences. "Differentiated" activities suggests that the supervisor be aware of the individual differences in personal and professional development among staff members and be prepared to address these through a wide repertoire of strategies and recommendations.

No wonder administrators feel overwhelmed by instructional supervision. Carried out in a meaningful way, this task puts the average administrator in a role that appears impossible to carry out. On the one hand, the administrator is the supervisor, the person in the position of authority; on the other hand, she is striving to carry out this role in collaboration *with* the other person. At the same time, the administrator is expected to be the expert who can identify (if not actually provide)

the appropriate developmental activities for each staff member; to do this, the administrator needs to be an expert not only with respect to teaching and learning at the student level but also at the adult level and the organizational level. And this is supposed to be carried out while the administrator performs all of the other managerial and leadership tasks associated with running a school.

It is no surprise, then, that, at its best, instructional supervision is carried out in ways that improve over old methods of impressionistic generalities or checklists but that are still standardized and limited in their capacity to go beyond giving the teacher some useful feedback about a particular lesson. Perhaps as an administrator works with a teacher over time, she is able to help the teacher see how the teacher's behavior and the supervisor's feedback "add up" to a bigger picture. But the cost associated with such an intense relationship may be difficult to justify when multiplied by the number of teachers on a school staff who would benefit from such ongoing interaction.

If, indeed, the intention of instructional supervision is to promote increased instructional effectiveness in schools, to provide the staff with a greater capacity to teach all students successfully, using the classroom observation and feedback model will not do the job. This is not to say that this model is not necessary or useful. But the incremental and individual changes that it can generate are inadequate to address the pressing needs of many schools; and the demands and expectations that this places on administrators are simply unreasonable for the majority. Most significantly, however, reliance on this observation model fails to take into account how the individual behaviors of teachers in classrooms are related to the success of the total school program and operation. Any effort to improve a school's overall capacity to provide successful learning experiences for students must take into account the nature of the school as a social system, as an organization whose members share responsibility for outcomes and for the quality of experience of all participants. Attempting to develop the instructional capabilities of the individuals who comprise the organization without addressing their capacity as a group will lead to limited improvement at best.

Promoting school-wide instructional excellence requires administrators to develop strategies to work with and empower their staffs collectively so that the *group* can effectively address the operation of the school as an instructional organization. As long as the administrator is seen as the authority or expert (who also happens to carry out staff evaluations), as long as teachers are encouraged to deal with instructional improvement issues in isolation from each other, school-wide effectiveness in teaching all students will be an elusive goal.

CREATING SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS

How does a site administrator work with a school staff to develop their collective capacity to address the challenges they face as an educational organization? Once again, there is no single best way to think about this; however, there are a number of perspectives that complement each other in helping to describe what such an approach might entail. The work of Schon, which concerns various aspects of reflective practice, has already been mentioned; over the past several years, his ideas have received increasing attention and application as tools for supporting the professional growth of both administrators and teachers (Hart, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1987; Barnett, 1985; Richert, 1989, 1990). The concept of school culture and its importance for school improvement and excellence is another important construct that is growing in prominence (Deal, 1987; Joyce, 1990). Research and writing in the area of collaborative working arrangements and interactions among school staff members is still another perspective on ways of "doing it better" (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989).

Concepts such as these provide us with useful "lenses" through which to view the educational challenges of the 1990s and beyond. They suggest to us several principles that can support our search for solutions. They remind the administrator, for example, not only that context is important with respect to the decisions and choices she makes, but also that context is a variable that can be influenced and manipulated itself. They underscore the importance of examining our work, our uses of knowledge, both individually and collectively, and learning from each other. And they highlight the importance of shared purpose, norms, and commitment.

Groundwork for Administrators

For the administrator, promoting the development of the school staff as learners must begin with taking such a stance with respect to his own work. Through the kinds of professional development activities that he chooses, an administrator can develop his own capacity to reflect on his work and consider how he engages in sense-making regarding his own leadership and the organization of teaching and learning at his site. Through participation with other school leaders in administrator networks that foster collegial support, shared learning opportunities, and discussion of practice, administrators can develop a conscious and openminded awareness of how they come to carry out their work as they do.[2] They can learn to see how their own characteristics, knowledge, and ways of thinking are played out in their day-to-day activities and interactions. From this awareness comes both the *capacity* and the *propensity* to seek ways of "doing it better."

As administrators develop the capacity to engage in conscious meaning-making about their own work, they can facilitate the development of the same capacity and propensity among and with their staffs. Indeed, the notion of teachers reflecting on

their own actions is not a new one; neither is the idea of collegiality and collaboration among teachers. For such activities to yield school-level benefits, however, they must be encouraged and coordinated by the administrator. In doing so, the challenge for the administrator lies in creating ways of leading that do not separate him or her from the shared community of the school and its professional staff. This point is underscored by Petrie (1990), in writing about educational reform: "If teachers are to be models of meaning-making for their students, then educational leaders will have to *model joint meaning-making with the teachers*" (p. 22, emphasis added). The same idea is echoed in the writing of Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) with respect to successful staff development: "Administrators exercise strong leadership by promoting a 'norm of collegiality,' *minimizing status differences between themselves and their staff members*, promoting informal communication, and reducing their own need to use formal controls to achieve coordination" (p. 52, emphasis added).

Supporting the Involvement of Teachers

An administrator who sees the value of engaging staff in shared meaning-making must be willing to engage in a process that is in some ways similar to that of a teacher working with a heterogeneous group of students. Different levels of experience, skills, concerns, and needs will enter the picture, as will differences in values and beliefs. The administrator must be willing to consider ways in which such differences shape the task of creating the overall tapestry of the school. For example, some factors, such as the individual skills of the staff, are givens that the organization has available to use and develop as resources. Others, such as certain kinds of values or individual preferences, may represent differences that enrich the diversity of the overall picture being created. Still others may have no place in the picture (for example, the belief that not all children can learn).

As much as possible, then, the administrator must accept and respect the differences among staff members. The persons who comprise the school staff are the most important resource of the school community for achieving desired outcomes. To engage them fully and productively in the enterprise of creating the school tapestry requires acknowledging them as professionals who are capable of purposeful cooperation and continued growth. A climate of mutual respect is essential for creating the conditions that allow groups of individuals to examine their own work and engage in shared inquiry and sense-making with each other (Barnett, 1988, 1990).

In the act of engaging her staff in collaborative opportunities to examine their work, a site administrator is incorporating two important principles of effective instructional supervision: by its very nature, this is supervision of instruction done *with*, and not *to*, teachers; and, by necessity, such interaction incorporates the

different stages of professional and personal development within the staff, since individuals cannot bring to it anything other than what they know and believe from their own experiences. Just as these principles support instructional improvement when applied to individuals in the classroom observation model, they also support instructional improvement when applied to groups. An administrator who works collaboratively with staff, acknowledging (and valuing) differences among members of the group, makes it possible for each individual to be engaged in the experience. This is the starting point for collective inquiry, exchanges, and sense-making that can be directed toward overall improvement of the school's instructional program.

Creating Opportunities for Staff Learning

To facilitate staff engagement in active learning, shared inquiry, and sense-making, structured opportunities and processes are necessary. These can occur in any number of ways. Opportunities can be created for groups as small as two and as large as the entire staff. They can be integrated into structures that already exist, such as regular faculty or department meetings, or new structures can be created. What is important is that teachers be encouraged and empowered to step back from their work and regard it as something to examine, speculate about, hypothesize from, experiment with and learn how to do better. Eventually, such a perspective should be a taken-for-granted element of how the school operates.

For the administrator, achieving such an outcome requires a facilitative kind of leadership that creates conditions under which such inquiry and sense-making can occur. It may mean finding ways of providing staff with some shared language for talking about their work, with a conceptual framework for capturing all the myriad factors that enter into their work and for representing how the parts (work in classrooms) contribute to the whole (school success). There are resources within the school staff and on the outside that can help with this; the role of the principal is to keep facilitating and encouraging the integration of ideas, to keep bringing the staff back to some key questions and overarching ideas.[3]

The kinds of focal questions that support collaborative inquiry, learning, and sense-making for a school staff are ones that exhibit characteristics such as the following: They encourage group members to examine their own knowledge, theories, beliefs, experiences, and values; that is, they support people in becoming more conscious and reflective about themselves and their work. They encourage divergent thinking and multiple ways of examining school phenomena; rather than leading to "right answers," they allow people to consider how a variety of points of view, theories, or interpretations can illuminate the challenges they face. Finally, they make it possible for group members to return to their own work with a sense of having benefitted from the experience; they bring people back to practice and to their purpose as educators.

By making it possible for a staff to be engaged with each other as a community of adult learners, an administrator develops the most important resource of the school, its faculty. The process of creating such a community takes time; it might require that the administrator relinquish some of his control; it means engaging staff in activities and processes that may, at first, seem strange to them. But such an effort generates the most significant benefits for the organization and its students: it makes it possible for a staff to weave the individual threads of their work into a stronger and more beautiful school tapestry.

CONCLUSION

The performance of an educator cannot be truly effective if it is treated as mechanical behavior by the individual himself or the person's colleagues. We cannot expect teachers to work successfully with all students without improving their capacity to examine and interpret the challenges they face and the knowledge they can use to address these challenges. This kind of improvement, using inquiry and reflection, is best promoted when a school staff works collaboratively and cooperatively; it requires interaction with other professionals to enable multiple perspectives to enrich each person's own learning. Moreover, the challenges faced by schools require school-level consideration and strategies, in which each staff member has an interest and a role.

The site administrator can develop the conditions under which the school staff can engage in the process of inquiring together about their work. By setting the stage and facilitating opportunities for multiple perspectives and interpretations to be explored, the administrator supports individual and group sense-making with respect to their work. Out of this can come the authentic professional growth,

NOTES

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2. For example, the organization and operation of many principals' centers creates conditions such as these. More formal programs, such as the Peer-Assisted Leadership Program of Far West Laboratory, is another example. Mentoring and coaching can provide still another opportunity.
3. One important overarching idea concerns the staff's vision of what it is they are trying to create in their school. Without some idea of the tapestry they are trying to weave, there is no point of reference against which to consider various choices and no way of deciding how to assign priorities to competing demands. A school staff, as a group, cannot engage in productive sense-making without having laid the groundwork of clarifying their overall purpose.

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